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ABSTRACT

Because of geographic isolation, many Australian families find it necessary to send their children to boarding schools for an appropriate secondary education. To determine the impact that leaving home has on young adolescents, and how they cope with the change, 38 year-8 boarding-school students from remote areas of Western Australia were surveyed. The director of the hostel where they lived and a school psychologist were interviewed concerning policies that aid student transition. Results indicate that the ease of making the transition from home to the boarding situation was heavily reliant upon expectations, which were derived from family ideology and the child's background. Personal attributes such as self-confidence and self-esteem, the ability to make friends, interest in sports, and previous experience with change contributed to ease of adjustment. How a child coped often had a lot to do with how well their parents were prepared for this eventuality. Factors that facilitated the transition were a high quality of care provided by the hostel, close staff and student relationships, opportunities to meet others and communicate effectively, an environment where facilities and opportunities stimulated and benefited the individual, the presence of siblings at the hostel, and programs and policies that considered each child's unique way of dealing with the move away from home and offered support. (TD)

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The Emotional Transition of Twelve Year Olds from Home to a Boarding Situation

by
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Abstract-

Often in Australia, isolation creates barriers to opportunities and facilities that are readily available to other children. Leaving home, or boarding away is an issue that is faced by many Australian families if children are to attend secondary education. This transition forces many changes in behaviour to adjust and accept the move. so how can we aid in this transition? by being aware of and understanding the typical behaviours and coping strategies that are adopted by the young adolescent, then perhaps we can interpret what impact programmes and environments have on the individual in this situation. Only following this, would we then be able to effectively facilitate a positive experience.

Literature Review -

There is so little documented research done concerning children who leave home to attend a boarding facility. the studies that have been done seem to explain conditions of boarding schools in other countries, especially Britain and America, where the needs of the children and impacting environments vary incredibly to those faced by many children in Australia. Issues covered in such studies focus greatly on facilities available and the funding of such - both materialistic in value, and avoid specifying the effect of such a change in atmospheres has on the individual.

The most obvious difference between Australia and other countries is the impact of geographical remoteness. Research done on boarding schools in Britain and America related to those 'elite' schools attended out of choice, rather than need. Its seems that quite the opposite is true in this country and there is a need to ensure that making the transition from home to boarding is comfortable and does not create unneeded stress and anxiety to both the children and their families. Being made aware of issues/experiences that may impact, both positively and negatively, on the child's adapting to a new situation, need to be identified. This is the purpose of my research.

There are few organisation within Australia that offer support and services to families in rural communities. One important service though is that of the Isolated Children's Parent's Association (ICPA) which works to promote a general awareness and understanding of the problems and needs of isolated families in education their children.

This Association offers support and friendship, but also gives isolated parents a voice to express their concerns and to work towards gaining equality of access for their children's education. "A geographically isolated child is one who does not have reasonable daily access to an appropriate school" (ICPA,nd). An appropriate school in this case is one with sufficient curriculum offerings to enable all children to achieve their individual potential. While the ICPA associates itself with the education of isolated children, other organisations too, seem to

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focus on a specific domain of support - whether it be financial assistance/funding, housing/hostels, facilities, or incentives/scholarships.

Recently an organisation known as the Country High School Hostels Authority published research they did on 'Understanding the Secondary Education Needs of Isolated Families' (1995). This study was used to ascertain information on how parents chose a secondary school, including the listing of advantages and disadvantages of boarding, as viewed by both parents and child. It was then evident that parents felt that boarding away from home provided more options and opportunities, sporting facilities, the opportunity to make more friends, and become more independent; but at the same time the majority of parents also felt they couldn't control 'influences', keep an eye on progress, that it was more expensive, and that their child matured too early. Of a survey done by students, it was found that the greatest advantage of boarding away was lots of close friends. They also mentioned sport, equipment and facilities, outings/camps, the supervisors, and becoming independent. Biggest disadvantages were found to be the food, 'stupid' discipline/rules, supervisor double standards, a fixed schedule, living away from home, and having no privacy (Country High School Hostels Authority, 1995). From this research, the authority proposed to provide high quality residential college accommodation for students from isolated areas to further their education. the Authority's powers and functions are provided under the Country High School Hostels Authority Act 1960-1979. this legislation provides for the establishment and administration of student boarding facilities.

Studies have been done recently by the Commonwealth Schools Commission (1982, 1984), that discuss Australia's large distances and the need for students to live away from home to attend school. They acknowledge that finding a 'second home' for any child places both emotional and financial demands on the family. But the reports concentrate solely on the funding of services, forgetting the notability of issues that impact on the individual internally while all the external change takes place. In order for society to form some kind of understanding, they will need to know what the individual goes through and how they cope with the change. To recognize the impact that leaving home has on such a young adolescent, is an aspect that needs to be explored more comprehensively.

In an article written by Peter Cookson (1982), he discusses a relationship between boarding schools and the moral community. "Through a specific process of assimilation boarding school students undergo a moral career that is designed to shape their characters and their general social perspective"..."boarding schools provide protective environments by which students may act out their identity struggles guided by the moral perspective of the school community" (Cookson, 1982, p95). While this may be true, the views and attitudes of the individual child are ignored. Cookson's (1982) methodology takes on a very external, theoretical view of the situation, and this characteristic, I feel, jeopardises the opportunity to better understand the development process of any one child. If attending a boarding facility has a great influence on a child's moral development as suggested by Cookson (1982), then I feel that the impact it has on the child's emotional growth needs to be researched even more thoroughly.

Previous studies relating to this topic have given an impersonal perspective based on principle and philosophy. the lack of research done on issues faced by young adolescents in rural and isolated areas of Australia, makes it difficult to challenge the conclusions drawn by other researchers, with my own. My objective then, is to identify and interpret the emotions felt by the child upon making the transition from home to a boarding situation, and how different experiences and individuals cope with the change.

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RESEARCH QUESTION

How does the young adolescent deal with the transition from home to boarding?

METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm

The interactive perspective of methodology is one that illustrates the importance of what is learned through interaction and interpretation. For this reason, the students themselves are central to what meaning is proportioned to the experience they share, which is the move away from home. My role is to use inductive reasoning to form a symbolic understanding based on how I have interpreted an individual's reasons for social action. I need to firstly identify how the shift from living away from home affects the individual, and how the child's environment many contribute to emotions felt.

Qualitative research will dominate my study to capture reality in interaction, therefore determining the meaning and regularities of social actions/behaviour similar or dissimilar among a group of young adolescents. I will be incorporating quantitative research methods in the form of a questionnaire, to better create an overall picture of emotions and changes provoked by a transition that relies on quite a deal of flexibility and adaption. Rather than relying on statistics and 'clear cut' data analysis, this research is more concerned with identifying the impact of uncertain issues, like the quality of care, hostel relationships between both staff and other students, facilities, atmosphere, and also policies/programmes in place to help children cope with the change.

Subjects

In order to research the emotional transition that a twelve year old may experience when leaving home to attend a boarding or hostel facility, I have involved thirty eight year eight students in a Hostel.

These students are from very remote areas of Western Australia, boarding in order to attend a secondary school, which more often than not, is not accessible to them. I also received the involvement by the Director of the Hostel and a school psychologist.

Materials:
The students participated in an optional questionnaire to help identify the relevance of different issues they may face as part of the transition. In addition to this, I had in-depth interviews with the director of the Hostel and a school psychologist concerning policies adopted to aid in the transition.

Procedures:
I contacted the Hostel and asked for their involvement in the research project. In interviewed the Director initially and then took the year eight students and explained my research objectives before personally handing out the questionnaire which was returned to me after its completion. I then finally interviewed the school psychologist.

Analysis:

After collecting the information from the interviews and questionnaires, extracted and compiled the relevant issues, discussing outcomes and drawing conclusions in a report form. This report will identify and interpret both behaviours and policies, explaining how and why they are believed to impact upon the child. A copy of my final report, withholding any personal information, will be made available in the library of the Hostel where any student can access it.

Ethical considerations:
It was made quite clear that involvement in both interviews and questionnaires, was entirely optional, and that any information that could identify someone, was not disclosed. This was covered in my letter of consent that required a signature by all involved, and I also addressed the issue prior to commencing interviews and filling out of questionnaires.

Questions were also structured so as not to intimidate or embarrass the participant. When issuing out questionnaires, I made myself available for any queries or assistance the participant needed, letting them know too, that I'd rather they ask, than become confused and ignore the question. Is used a small recorder in interviews, but only after the compliance of the interviewee. Following submission of my research, I will burn raw data and erase tapes to ensure confidentiality, and until then it is stored in a locked cabinet.

Results:
The variation of responses in information received from both interviews and questionnaires, has made for some interesting drawing of conclusion. If I am to identify and interpret how the young adolescent deals with the transition from home to boarding, there is a need to focus on emotions felt upon leaving home, and support processes. To better present the results of my findings, I will concentrate on four particular issues, which include, the quality of care; relationships with staff and other students; the environment created by facilities and opportunities available, and importantly too, the policies and programmes that have been adopted to help cope with the change. These issues are all very much interrelated and have a significant impact on the individual.

Quality care is a term contributed to by all different factors, resulting in the opportunity and environment for any one person to develop and achieve to their individual potential. Of the thirty eight respondents to my questionnaire, all but two believed that the Staff at the Hostel genuinely cared about their well-being. This many be attributed to by the clear acknowledgment by staff that the move away from home is very difficult. According to the Director of the Hostel, "We would have eighty percent of our staff training each year devoted to how we can help the young person emotionally and psychologically adapt to this sort of

environment and how we can pass on coping skills" (Director, interview, 1997). When asked whether they felt comfortable in approaching staff members with any problems, students had varied responses, more feeling comfortable in talking to their housemistress/master casually as a friend. It was evident that students believed their houseparent related well to the majority of people in that boarding house, but there were nine students who disagreed with this comment and some who believed that it only happened occasionally. The staff have been trained to let the child know that they are there for them, also making them aware of support services they can seek, and the students supported that their house staff made an effort to understand what other obligations and activities they got involved in.

Quality care is heavily reliant upon expectation. This is derived from family ideology, and so what background the child has come from. When asked how the families of children living away to attend school deal with the transition, the Director of the Hostel commented that they, "...deal with it with great difficulty - particularly those where it is their first child. they feel very guilty, they feel they are missing an important part of their child's development, it doesn't take them too long to feel that either"

(Director, interview, 1997). One issue that came across very strongly in my research, was how much easier it was for students to fit in if they had an older brother or sister boarding with them. Only seven students indicated that they did not have a sibling at the Hostel, which was surprising considering there were only thirty eight participants. Apart from a brother or sister, many knew no one at the Hostel before attending, thus supporting the theory that isolation creates barriers. When asked whether they found leaving home difficult, there were mixed responses amongst students. Fourteen adolescents did find it difficult, the rest, not as much, but approximately a third of the students did not get to see their family on occasions other than holidays.

Relationships between students at boarding school are very supportive. this was clearly illustrated in a question asking whether the individual got on with the majority of the people in their boarding house, but there were a range of responses to the benefits of vertical housing creating a family style atmosphere. It was then made very obvious that these students didn't find it difficult having to share a house with so many others. "A big factor of communal living is you grow strong in developing and maintaining friendships and relationships, but at first the young year eight has difficulty in doing that" (Director, interview, 1997).

the association between students and members of staff is important in developing a system of support. Most of the respondents believe they have the opportunity to speak up about ideas for changes that they feel would be appreciated. this could be interpreted as an individual feeling their opinion is valued by others, therefore giving them a confidence amongst strangers. Before a child adapts to this new environment, there are changes recognised by staff in their behaviour. "Boys will become very quiet. they will feel very intimidated in a house with thirty - thirty two other boys going up to year twelve, so they withdraw. Mostly, however, the biggest problem with boys is they become outwardly -very active, they will be perceived by older boys as being 'cheeky' (Director, interview, 1997). Then each must learn that respect has to be shared.

Girls, however, are more likely to talk to each other about how they feel, and share emotions. This was pointed out by many girls as the factor that made it most easier for them to settle into a boarding facility. For this same question, there were different responses, including many saying they found it difficult at first but settled in and didn't find it so bad, those that found it more difficult leaving their family and were quite homesick, the help of an older sibling at the Hostel, some mentioned programmes like peer support and orientation as helping, the friendliness of others, the support by house staff, the opportunities making them

feel at home, finding new friends. These are all quite positive, but there were some that also mentioned things that made the move more difficult, like the jobs and routines, the food, the not knowing others before coming, feeling intimidated or anxious by the large groups at the Hostel and school, the older students not including the younger ones in activities/conversation, and especially not seeing their family very often.

The staff watch for those children who seem very upset, withdrawn, very dependent on someone else, those who seem to have eating problems, and especially those who are aggressive, because these are characteristics of children who are finding it very difficult to settle in, but there are probably many more characteristics. "Some kids cope with change and are a lot more adaptable than others; I think it varies enormously. It depends on their previous experiences, their personality, and self-esteem. Kids who have had a bit of change and are confident, good at sport, outgoing, tend to cope fairly well" (School psychologist, interview, 1997).

It can be concluded from results that many students feel they came to the Hostel to receive a better education, but when asked whether they had the choice of whether to board at this Hostel or not, it was surprising the number that did. Thirty four of the thirty eight respondents expressed that they did have the choice. Environments created for studying, sleeping and socialising, I found were supported by students as being beneficial for the purpose they served.

Most children have moved away from a small close knit environment to engage in large communal living, thus creating a fair amount of shock. One coping strategy identified by staff is when the student really buries themselves in activities and is therefore involved in everything. they are then "...engaged in something positive with a whole variety of different groups of people and make friendships quickly" (Director, interview, 1997). the students too, believed that the opportunities open to them at the Hostel, were greater than those expected at home. The parents and the families of young adolescents that leave home to board away also find it very difficult. How a child copes often has a lot do with "...how prepared Mum and Dad are for this eventuality, and that doesn't mean that Mum and Dad are cold and callous, but whether they've had time to really think about what this is going to mean and how they will cope with that. Secondly, how much of the child's background was involved in helping them become independent - that has a lot to do with coping in a live-in situation. I think also whether they come from a large family or not. Are they used to living with different ages?" (Director, interview, 1997). It was mentioned by both the director of the Hostel and the school psychologist that a child's success at school and at making friends, their level of self-esteem, and their confidence all contribute to how they adapt, and so the quality of staff and the communication of staff, in recognising the above, is really important.

When asked what the organisation could do to improve the transition, I was told that there was always room for improvement. More could be done with building a stronger relationship with parents, "If the parent is confident that the young person is with someone who cares, then the parent is going to help the young person cope better" (Director, interview, 1997) Ongoing staff training was another issue, an advantage of which would be a houseparent capable of recognising the signs and the importance of the stress that the young adolescent goes through, and the stress parents are going through, so as being able to work effectively with them. the Director would also like to see the year seven orientation period extended to a week, so as the individual is less of a stranger to what they will experience in the following year. They would also like to better involve the parents and have them stay and get to know the house staff who will be responsible in many ways for their child. Within the Hostel I researched, all are involved in a Staff Competencies-Based Review and Planning Process, which is an accreditation process assessing staff on behaviour management, interpreting

education needs, leadership and organisation, communication, facilitating personal development, role modelling, and professional attributes. This can only help to further improve the quality of care provided by the staff.

Discussion

Leaving home to attend a boarding facility is a transition that is different for everyone. Thee is now way we can predict how a young adolescent will cope, but we can certainly be there to support them in any way possible. If we learn effective ways to promote quality care, then the experience of moving away from home in order to access better education and opportunities, will be positive for all involved. These young adolescents are expected to grow up pretty fast, becoming independent sooner, and therefore, more responsible for their actions. The support from family is extremely important in how the young person copes, whether their parents recognise and are prepared for the transition, but also importantly whether there is an older sibling boarding to advise, and confide in. It was the vision of the Hostel researched, "To be acknowledged in the communities we serve and within the fields of education and residential care as an innovative, dynamic and distinctive contributor to the education, personal development and well-being of students in Western Australia" (Director, interview, 1997).

Personal attributes like self-confidence and esteem, the ability to make friends, and previous experiences, all contribute to how easy or difficult leaving home and adapting to a new environment will be. If a comparison is made with the psychosocial stages of development as proposed by Erikson (1963, 1968), an adolescent faces the crisis of 'identity versus role confusion'. Within this struggle, a child tries to investigate various alternatives concerning future occupations, their personal future, and establish a sense of who they are and where they belong (Kaplan, 1986). It really is a period of experimentation and often a push for independence. It may be insinuated then, that leaving home, and a stable support system, would make the crisis even more difficult and stressful for this aged individual.

We can assume that to ease the transition from home to boarding, we can really just strive to ensure that there is a high quality of care, facilitate close staff and student relationships by providing opportunities to meet others and communicate effectively, create an environment where facilities and opportunities stimulate and benefit the individual, and finally have programmes in place that take into consideration each child's unique way of dealing with the move away from home and offer support. Each of these factors work together in helping a young adolescent make a positive learning experience out of such an emotional driven transition.

This research is not cut and dry, but has helped to identify and better understand what can be expected when a child leaves home to board away. Isolation, perhaps we can conclude, forces upon many young people an expectancy to grow and develop earlier in order to counteract the lack of access to opportunity it bestows. It cannot be overlooked however, that the opportunities and friendships made available to those who do leave home, often are one of the most significant experiences offered, especially if provided in a quality environment.